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# **Human Rights and Christian Responsibility**

**Report of the Consultation  
St. Pölten, Austria  
21 - 26 October 1974**

**WCC · CCIA**



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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

"...it is our conviction that the emphasis of the Gospel is on the value of all human beings in the sight of God, on the atoning and redeeming work of Christ that has given to man his true dignity, on love as the motive for action, and on love for one's neighbour as the practical expression of an active faith in Christ. We are members one of another, and when one suffers all are hurt."

With this statement the participants in the consultation on "Human Rights and Christian Responsibility" (St. Pölten, Austria, October 1974) again expressed one of the earliest concerns of the ecumenical movement. Coming out of the trauma of the Second World War, the delegates to the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Amsterdam 1948) were moved by their immediate experience with what happens when the few assume the right to determine the destiny of the many. In their discussion of the urgent need to establish international protection for human rights, the founders of the WCC set a pattern for all the succeeding Assemblies. The Fifth Assembly will certainly be no exception. There also many delegates will be present whose direct experience of the violation of human rights today will highlight the fact that present structures of injustice in our world flatly contradict God's purpose for His Creation and threaten the very survival of humanity.

The Amsterdam Assembly called for effective international protection of human rights. In response to this and many other similar appeals, the United Nations adopted on 10 December 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and established the UN Commission on Human Rights. They have had an undeniable and important impact on the world, and we must be grateful for the United Nations' work in this field. It has led to the incorporation of human rights principles in the constitutions of a number of newly-independent nations. It has given rise to the adoption of the European and Inter-American Conventions on Human Rights. Without these things, the present situation would undoubtedly have been much worse.

Still, the attitudes of the Cold War and the refusal especially of the powerful nations to accept the full implications of international human rights standards dashed the high hopes awakened in 1948. Progress in implementing the provisions of the Universal Declaration has been dismally slow. It took 18 years for the UN to adopt the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights. Today, 27 years after the adoption of the Declaration, neither of these two instruments has gained the required minimum of 35 ratifications by member states, to be brought into force.

The objective situation of human rights today, despite the important efforts made in many quarters to defend them, is at a low point. While large numbers of people in the industrialized nations have escaped the bondage of poverty, the vast majority of our fellow human beings earn hardly enough to buy their daily bread. Even within many affluent nations large pockets of abject poverty remain and are growing.

The rich have allowed their freedom, from the constant struggle for mere subsistence, to degenerate into a new form of dependence on exaggerated, destructive patterns of consumption. Rich nations seek to plug holes in their sinking economies by massive sales of arms to elitist groups in the poorer nations who use them to protect their own privileges against their peoples' insistent attempts to defend their rights. Rather than adopt policies capable of coping positively with growing unemployment and poverty in their own nations and abroad, governments of affluent countries continue to pour huge sums of money into the production of weapons of mass destruction, threatening not only themselves and their "enemies" but the whole of humankind.

The member churches of the WCC have been aware that as important as they are sound international legal standards alone are not sufficient to overcome this situation. Basic human attitudes and the structures which spawn and nourish them must be changed. An awareness of the fact of human misery, a rejection of all arguments which seek to rationalize or justify it, and active engagement in efforts to eradicate its causes are necessary preconditions for progress in this field. The churches increasingly recognize that the protection of human rights for individuals everywhere is linked with the need to change oppressive structures which perpetuate massive violations. As the Fourth Assembly (Uppsala 1968) stated, "in the modern world-wide community the rights of the individual are inevitably bound up with the struggle for a better standard of living for the underprivileged of all nations. Human rights cannot be safeguarded in a world of glaring inequalities and social conflict."

For Christians, what lies at the root of the many human rights violations arising out of poverty and economic exploitation is the egotism and greed of those who are unwilling to accept Jesus' commandment that we love one another. This is also responsible for the proliferation of repressive regimes which deny the people of many nations even a minimum participation in decisions affecting their lives. Seeking to increase further their own already exorbitant share of the wealth and power of their societies, these ruling groups have severely restricted or abolished fundamental freedoms. To withstand pressures for change, they have resorted in a number of cases to the most barbaric tactics. Torture, for example, has become a systematic practice in several countries and it is more brutal than ever before in human history.

Political prisoners abound, among them a very large number of clergy and laypeople. This form of repression against those who have witnessed for Jesus Christ through participation in the struggle for human rights in their countries represents a renewed attack on the principle and exercise of religious freedom which has long been the cornerstone of ecumenical discussions on human rights.

In the face of such massive and explosive problems relating to human rights, the WCC Central Committee (Addis Ababa 1971) recommended

"That a consultation be held on the initiative of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) to focus member churches' concern on human rights, to stimulate greater awareness of, and interest in, the problems involved vis-à-vis human rights and to present a report to the Central Committee with the purpose of initiating guidelines for future appropriate action in this domain."

In response, the CCIA embarked upon an intensive process of study, regional and national consultations and action programmes in preparation for an international, ecumenical consultation. Prior to the St. Pölten meeting two regional consultations were held in Latin America and another in Asia. In many countries national councils of churches, individual member churches and christian groups entered into study programmes, held seminars and produced background papers. In several cases churches and their leaders became more actively engaged in direct activities to defend human rights in their countries.

In discussion with regional and national ecumenical bodies, some 50 persons - theologians, human rights experts and others directly engaged in the struggle for human rights - were invited to the consultation on "Human Rights and Christian Responsibility". The participants came from 34 countries, East and West, North and South; capitalist and socialist; very rich and very poor; independent and still colonized. They were men and women of several races. Some were priests, ministers or professional church workers, and others were laypeople from Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions.

They were asked to review the situation of human rights in their countries, to share their various interpretations and emphases on human rights, and to develop a new ecumenical approach to human rights which corresponds to contemporary realities. The field was obviously broad, and left much room for disagreement. But in spite of the differences in culture, social systems, objective situations and interpretations of human rights represented here, the consultation was remarkable for its ability to achieve considerable consensus on many basic issues.

In the brief time available it was obviously impossible either to discuss all the world's human rights problems or even to prescribe completely satisfactory solutions for those which were discussed. The Consultation did not attempt to give the churches facile answers to complicated problems. But they were convinced that they had contributed something important to the continuing ecumenical discussion on human rights. They felt that they should share with the churches not only their conclusions, but the way they went about reaching them. Therefore, instead of a single report of the consultation, they decided to publish the consensus reached by the seven working groups.

The Consultation was divided into three parts. Presentations on various aspects of human rights were made on the first day. These are published in full in the original report of the Consultation, available from CCIA. Four working groups were then formed which produced the four reports reproduced here as the last four chapters. All were reported to the plenary which made no attempt to harmonize or improve them, but rather took them as a basis for the next stage of the Consultation's work. It was felt, however, that they contained important elements which merit study by the churches. The Consultation then met in three different working groups with whose consensus reports this document begins. In its final plenary discussion the Consultation felt that those three reports, with minor revisions, could represent the consensus view of the whole.

The Consultation strongly recommended that the churches study its reports in conjunction with the two volumes of background materials on which it based its work. They are available from CCIA.

The Consultation report was submitted in June this year to the Commission of CCIA which reviewed it and took the following action:

"The CCIA

"Approves the report of the St. Pölten Consultation on Human Rights and Christian Responsibility and judges that it contains important and necessary guidelines for the further development of ecumenical policy on human rights.

"Recommends that the report be forwarded to delegates to the WCC Fifth Assembly in a form which makes its main lines easily accessible.

"Directs the officers of CCIA to draw up, on the basis of the report, succinct policy proposals for submission to the Assembly.

"Adopts the recommendations contained in the parts of the consultation report entitled "Equipping the Local and National Churches to Identify Human Rights Violations and to Protect the Victims" and "Equipping Regional Ecumenical Bodies and the WCC for more Effective Defense and Promotion of Human Rights".

"Expresses its sincere hope that the Fifth Assembly will ensure that the issues raised by the consultation and the recommendations made by it are given high priority in the future policy and programme of the WCC, and will direct the new Central Committee accordingly."

In accordance with that decision, and in fulfilment of the Central Committee mandate, the CCIA hereby submits to the Fifth Assembly, particularly to participants in Section V, the report of the consultation for its consideration. In a real sense it expresses the reflections and concerns of many member churches and is in part a statement the hopes that those engaged in the struggle for human rights place in the ecumenical movement and in this Assembly.

Commission of the Churches  
on International Affairs

Geneva

October 1975

**Especially relevant background materials:**

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

International Covenants on Human Rights

Human Rights and Christian Responsibility, vol. 1  
(Consultation Background Documents)

Human Rights and Christian Responsibility, vol. 2  
(Consultation Background Documents)

Human Rights and the Churches in Africa  
(Report of the joint AACC-CCIA Consultation)



PROMOTING GREATER INTERNATIONAL AND ECUMENICAL UNDERSTANDING  
AND COOPERATION

FOR THE DEFENSE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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1. It is a sad thing to have to be thinking about ways of creating greater awareness and understanding of tragic situations in so many parts of the world caused by violations of basic human rights. It ought to be a burning concern of churches, and individual christians. It must be acknowledged, in honesty, that many local congregations are primarily concerned with the activities of their local church, that some regard discussion of these issues within the church as political activity that is not the proper function of the church, and that in some national situations the church is so closely identified with the state that condemnation of the violation of human rights is muted or confined to the wrong-doings of other countries.

2. Nevertheless, it is our conviction that the emphasis of the Gospel is on the value of all human beings in the sight of God, on the atoning and redeeming work of Christ that has given to man his true dignity, on love as the motive for action, and on love for one's neighbour as the practical expression of an active faith in Christ. We are members one of another, and when one suffers all are hurt. This is a christian interpretation of "human solidarity". That means also, that we are responsible for others as well because we have not done enough to show them our solidarity. We need more clarification to see what this means concretely for the understanding of human rights and for our responsibility for their implementation. We think it necessary to continue further the theological work. This work should be carried out by the churches as well as by the WCC.

3. One of the ways of creating greater awareness and understanding of the world situation is through awareness and understanding of one's own national situation, and of its relations to the situations of other nations in an inter-dependent world. This means dealing with actual situations, not with vague global generalizations. For instance, the issue of the rights of immigrant workers logically leads to consideration of the economic and social injustices due to internal and/or international exploitation that compel many workers to migrate. Such great problems of our time as economic crises, racial discrimination, food shortage, waste of resources, or pollution of the environment, affect all nations, and therefore give a starting point for a debate that is seen to be directly relevant but cannot be taken to a conclusion without informed understanding of what is happening elsewhere in the world, and why it is happening.

4. The mass media - newspapers, radio and television - have made people far more aware of world situations than was possible only a couple of generations ago. But too often presentation by the mass media is selective or slanted, reflecting national, political, social and cultural prejudices, so that the impressions which emerge may not be in accord with realities. Nevertheless, it should be realized that the information media have an important positive role in shaping a vigilant public opinion. The churches which should always be critical as regards their own stand and prejudices have a responsibility to use the media to inform about human rights issues and to counteract prejudices. We would also emphasize the necessity for a positive and continuing process of education at all levels - but specially in the schools - which should honestly and objectively teach the truth about the problems and aspirations of other nations.

5. The candid discussion in this Consultation has given clear evidence of differences in approach to "human rights". Should the emphasis be on the personal rights of the individual or on the collective rights of the community? Are there situations, such as the transition from colonial dependence to the responsibilities of full independence, which may justify the relative emphasis on some rights to secure a greater future good? On the one hand some would argue that the motive for christian concern for human rights should be purely humanitarian - the relief of suffering and injustice that deny human dignity - on the other hand it is replied that any intervention or protest on humanitarian grounds is inevitably and rightly, political activity. If the interpretation of "human rights" is conditioned by existing political, economic and social systems, should we anticipate that "rights" will change in a rapidly changing world? Or are there human rights that should be affirmed in any system?

6. The questions raised are not so divisive as might at first appear. Individual rights and collective rights are not in flat opposition. They are related. It should be the aim of the community to secure the welfare of all its members, the aim of the individual to serve the general good. In both instances, rights involve responsibilities. On the second question posed in para.5, it must be stated categorically that the limitation of human rights can never be justified when it is used as a device for oppression. The point raised - as a question for consideration - was that in periods of fundamental economic and political change leading to a more just society there is an emphasis on those rights which are considered essential to promoting such change and in consequence a lesser emphasis on other rights. This touches on very important, but delicate and sensitive issues, which demand deeper study. On the third matter of difference of approach, it was agreed that whether intervention

is humanitarian, or deliberately political, the result is political. On the last question we affirm that, though interpretations and emphases may vary, the basic rights listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should be upheld and implemented in every political and economic system. In fact, our discussion of these questions was itself not divisive. We recognized that we were considering the order of priorities in specific situations, not setting alternatives in irreconcilable opposition.

7. More than that, we agreed on ground common to all views that should enable the Churches to speak plainly on many important issues.

- a) There is a basic human right to life - including the whole question of survival, of the dangers and violations consequent on unjust economic, social and political systems and of the quality of life.
- b) There is a right to enjoy and maintain a cultural identity - which involves questions such as nations self-determination, rights of minorities, etc.
- c) There is a right to participate in decision-making within the community - which involves the whole question of effective democracy.
- d) There is a right to dissent - which preserves a community or system from hardening into authoritarian rigidity.
- e) There is a right to personal dignity - which involves condemnation, for example, of torture or of protracted imprisonment without trial.
- f) There is a right to choose freely a religion or belief which includes freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

8. The resolution of the Central Committee of the WCC, authorizing this Consultation, instructed us to relate standards of human rights to the cultural, socio-economic and political settings of different parts of the world, attention being given to religious liberty as a basic right. Religious liberty was specifically mentioned in a broad context, and was not intended to be the sole or primary concern. The WCC has frequently declared that religious liberty is a basic human right. This right is required so that the full responsibilities of Christian faith may be undertaken. This right is not a privilege or an exclusive freedom for the church. Human solidarity (see para.2) demands that we should be aware of the inter-relatedness of all rights including the rights of those of other faiths or no faiths. There have been times and places where the Church, claiming its rights and abrogating its responsibilities, has itself instigated

or condoned violations of the rights listed in para.7. But the right to religious liberty exists in order to serve the community according to the commands of the Gospel.

9. Without minimizing the difficulty of the problems, or boasting immodestly of our ability to solve them, it can be said that the ecumenical movement has a significant contribution to make. Within the movement there can be brought together - as in this Consultation - men and women from different religious traditions, differing political systems, differing economic situations, and differing cultures, but all united in Christ, and through their common allegiance and mutual trust able to share openly their agreements and disagreements, and so by genuine dialogue to learn from one another. Personal and confessional relationships, deepened and strengthened in the past twenty-six years, have made the WCC in the best sense of the word impartial, not identified with any particular culture or political system, and therefore able to move into critical international situations. The impact has been made greater by the joint action in some areas of concern with the Roman Catholic Church. We recognize that in the field of human rights there is need and scope for cooperation with adherents of other faiths and with all people of goodwill. But the WCC even as it is now, has resources and opportunities that should not be ignored.

10. This Consultation is but one stage in a process that began with the First Assembly of WCC, and must continue. Our hope is that the specific concentration of the Consultation on Human Rights and Christian Responsibility will accelerate the process. We recognize that the programme for the Fifth Assembly will raise in detail many of the issues that have been our concern, and we strongly urge that a way be found to declare unmistakably at the Assembly that they arise from a basic concern for human rights, and we hope that the outcome will be a clear challenge to the Churches and to Christians to see this as among the first priorities for Christian action.

11. The CCIA should continue to make special efforts to work closely with other Departments of the WCC and with international non-governmental organizations concerned with the promotion of human rights, with a view to coordinated action wherever possible. Every effort should be made to further the promotion and protection of human rights through inter-governmental agencies, particularly the United Nations and its Specialized Agencies, and also through regional organizations.

12. In the last analysis effective action by the Churches to influence political decisions and to sustain the leaders in the campaign depends upon the response of local congregations. The CCIA should therefore be strengthened in its role of providing

information and guidance to Churches and Christian agencies, thereby enabling them to exercise their responsibilities with respect to such matters as the right to life, the rights of minorities, the right to participation in decision-making, the right to dissent, the right to religious liberty, and the protection of prisoners, including the abolition of torture. In order to undertake this service the CCIA must be provided with additional resources.

## EQUIPPING REGIONAL ECUMENICAL BODIES AND THE WCC FOR MORE EFFECTIVE DEFENSE AND PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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While primary responsibility for the defense and promotion of human rights in relation to the actual situation in different parts of the world lies with local and national churches, the World Council of Churches and the regional ecumenical bodies have a major role to play.

As there are so many different accents in the understanding of human rights represented within the member churches, the WCC and the regional ecumenical bodies have a special responsibility to represent a concerted view, where personal, social and economic rights are seen in their context, and where violations of these rights are equally condemned.

The churches should set up, as the criteria for denouncing the violations, the rights of the exploited and the oppressed, which include a concern for particular individuals. When the churches raise their voices through their organizations, it is listened to with great attention both by secular international bodies and by governments. By supporting people or groups whose human rights are violated as well as identifying themselves where feasible with the priority concerns of countries, the churches have great opportunities to influence situations both nationally and internationally.

It must therefore be a duty both of the WCC and of the regional ecumenical bodies to intensify their endeavours in the field of human rights, and to use all their possibilities to assist victims of human rights violations and to further acceptance and observance of human rights in all parts of the world.

Efforts undertaken in this connection by the WCC and by the regional ecumenical bodies can only be successful if they are carried out by men and women together. Women must be given a real opportunity to make a major contribution to awareness-building and decision-making as well as to the actions which follow out of them in the understanding and the implementation of human rights.

### PROPOSALS

1. The WCC is urged to give increased priority to finding ways of equipping and enabling itself, as soon as possible, to respond more effectively and widely to human rights situations. Three concrete proposals were made in this regard:

- 1.1 Creation of a Human Rights desk within CCIA.
- 1.2 Continuation of WCC support functions (moral, financial), providing resources to churches and groups dealing with human rights situations as it has done in the past few months for Latin America.
- 1.3 Encouraging and stimulating regional bodies, councils, and conferences, where appropriate, to set up human rights services to carry out vital functions of theological reflection, education and action in human rights situations.

2. Information. The WCC and the regional ecumenical bodies are encouraged to gather, evaluate and disseminate information regarding human rights violations. This information should be shared with non-governmental organizations, governments, international bodies and agencies, and with the churches and action groups in all regions for the purpose of effective pooling of information on current situations with a view to future planning of a preventive nature.

Specifically, and in this sense, it is recommended that information centers in various parts of the world which already exist be encouraged and enabled to provide intercommunication facilities and material for the churches, internationally and nationally, and that centers for documentation of human rights violations and their causes be created where such centers do not exist.

3. Protest and denunciation. The WCC and the regional ecumenical bodies are encouraged to issue statements when appropriate, designed to diminish the negative effects of human rights situations, especially where the local churches or regional bodies are prevented from doing so. It should be done with sensitivity where people are liable to suffer as a result of such intervention. It is noted, in effect, that while local bodies are more intimately acquainted with human rights situations than the regional bodies, and that these in turn have more information than the WCC, in many instances, "the closer one is to the realities, the less one is able to act."

4. Delegations/representations. The WCC is urged to make available delegations/representations to visit countries or regions where human rights violations have become so severe as to go beyond the responsibilities of local, national or regional groups to remedy them. This activity should be seen as a pastoral duty, as an act of solidarity of Christians throughout the world with the victims and with those struggling along with them for the defense of their rights. It should be undertaken wherever possible in cooperation and coordination with local and regional bodies. The importance of the selectivity of WCC interventions was stressed,

so as to ensure maximum effectiveness, and the situation and responsibilities of the local churches, and the national and regional bodies should be fully taken into account.

5. Education or awareness-building. The WCC should encourage theological studies in the churches regarding human rights, in dialogue with other groups, and the exchange of such studies. The WCC and regional bodies should issue press releases and documents on human rights and should promote the use of these and other human rights publications. The churches should be encouraged to develop curricula to increase conscientization in the field of human rights.

Traditional discussions on religious freedom have often been insufficient. It is fundamentally important to guarantee to every person the right to live and fulfill his or her responsibility to the community, according to his or her basic convictions, be they religious or not. It is along these lines the churches and the WCC should continue to study and deepen their understanding of this concern which transcends the interest of the churches, in order to open up new possibilities of achieving greater international, ecumenical cooperation in the field of human rights.

6. Commissions of inquiry. The WCC, on the initiative of persons, groups or churches in a given area, if possible in cooperation with local churches or councils of churches, should set up a special churches' commission of inquiry into cases of blatant violations of human rights. Its work would be to gather, systematize and make public the facts relating to the particular situation, and to make known its views. It would be left to the discretion of the WCC and particularly the CCIA to decide when and how this suggestion should be implemented.

7. Coordination. The WCC is encouraged to cooperate with other international and regional agencies and bodies, both ecumenical and governmental/non-governmental, so as to avoid duplication of information and action in the area of human rights. Regional ecumenical bodies are encouraged to collaborate with existing regional offices of UN agencies, NGO's and similar bodies with specialized functions touching upon human rights.

8. World confessional families. These bodies have their role to play in the area of human rights; it is recommended therefore that the report of this consultation be sent to the world confessional families, in the hope that through coordinated study and action the defense and promotion of human rights will be served with increasing effectiveness.



## EQUIPPING THE LOCAL AND NATIONAL CHURCHES TO IDENTIFY HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND TO PROTECT THE VICTIMS

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### The resources of the churches

What are the resources of the churches and christian communities at national and local levels in their own societies to identify violations of human rights and their root causes, the victims and those responsible? How is it possible to develop more effective approaches? In most countries the churches have such resources. The question is: How are they used? The chief resource, indeed the foundation of the Church is of course the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a vision of justice and dignity amidst the blatant injustice and degradation of humanity which reign among us. Yet many churches have become integral parts of their nation-states' power structures and do not apply that vision. Other churches have come into paralyzing conflict and tension with Government leaders. In both instances church leaders sometimes feel prevented from speaking openly.

For these and other reasons more attention must be given to communities or groups, within or marginal to the churches, or indeed outside the churches. (In some cases perhaps it is the churches who are marginal to these groups.) These are mainly church people, often joined together ecumenically, and they are often effective in influencing church and government policy. Often too christians should join with people of other faiths and ideologies in common efforts to promote and defend human rights.

However, local situations vary. Important differences are to be observed between countries with a christian majority and those with a christian minority. In the former there are problems of ecclesiastical power and congregational apathy. In the latter there is often more intense concern but great hesitance to approach the authorities.

### Information

It was repeatedly noted that many churches lack information about the violations of human rights throughout the world, and even in their own countries. Information on individual cases of violations is needed, but it is also important to inform about the situations which give rise to the violations. People in affluent societies receive information on how their societies oppress others. Information must go beyond mere description. Churches must encourage their members to study the social and economic background of human rights violations.

Many information sources exist which could be tapped: the United Nations and its Specialized Agencies, the World Council of Churches, etc. exist at the international level. But individual churches and christians should also research their own communities and nations to gather their own information.

### The pastoral action of the churches

Pastoral action in the churches requires the mobilization of all men and women of the local and national Churches with experience in the field of human rights. It should include:

- practical catachetical education and preaching on the biblical motivation for human rights.
- informed reflexion on the changing world social and economic situation and the need to subject certain personal rights of the poor and despised.
- preparing congregations and individuals for difficult and costly decisions in the area of human rights (drawing particular attention to the WCC study on Violence and Non-Violence).
- acquainting members of local and national churches who have responsibilities related to the custody and treatment of prisoners with the "Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners", and calling upon them to respond to non-observance of these Rules with conscientious objection to actions in violation of human rights.
- practising in local and national churches sharing of material resources and respect for others' needs.

In a proper pastoral approach there is no dichotomy between prayer and action. Social and political activism is not necessarily the only way to advance the cause of human rights. We may have more resources in the churches than we think. Religious teaching must be constantly renewed in order to interpret the Gospel for today. Communities and parishes are sometimes apathetic or afraid. They need to be confronted with the reality of human suffering. They need to be helped to assume not only their pastoral but also their prophetic role and to give strength to their governing bodies or leaders who require the support of the whole Church if they are to become effective in the national sphere.

### Recommendations

1. The churches should bring to the attention of their constituencies, and of public opinion at large, the importance for all countries to ratify the International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and on Civil and Political Rights

(and its Optional Protocol) adopted by the UN on 16 December 1966. Governments who have not yet registered their ratification should be urged to do so.

2. The suggestions contained in the "Joint Statement on the 25th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights", issued over the signatures of Dr. Philip Potter (for the World Council of Churches) and Cardinal Roy (for the Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace) on December 7, 1973 should be recalled. Two of its main points were:

- a) "We appeal to local churches, and particularly to christian leaders and educators, to initiate or intensify programmes of instruction and sensitization on human rights, and corresponding duties, so that every person, regardless of race, religion, class or nationality may be aware of the qualities of human life to which he is entitled."
- b) "Together we must promote and defend human rights, in each of our own respective societies. And in solidarity with all those who struggle for freedom and justice, we must identify our efforts to remove the root causes of human suffering wherever it occurs."

3. The churches should address themselves to the great task of conscientizing the people, of stirring the hearts of the faithful, that they may be alert to the existence in this world of exploiters and exploited, of oppressive and unjust political structures, and that they may recognize that in many cases they, the christians, may be among the exploiters and oppressors. Special attention should be paid to the ecumenical education of clergy and lay leaders in matters related to human rights.

4. The WCC, particularly the CCIA, and local and national churches should stand ready with information and advice for or to receive appeals from those who consider their human rights have been violated. They should be helped to use the instruments of the UN and the resources of appropriate NGO's.

5. Legal machinery for the protection of human rights within each country should be developed and maintained that is available to all. Churches should consider providing legal assistance where this is not readily available.

6. In view of the increased use of torture, churches should actively and firmly admonish the torturers, emphasising that by these inhuman actions they are excluding themselves from the community of believers.

7. The CCIA should facilitate the exchange of information about national situations, and promote mutual encouragement and correction. In so doing it should bear in mind that the collection and dissemination of information on human rights may be considered a 'subversive' activity in some countries.

THE RIGHT TO LIFE AND WORK:  
THE BASIC SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

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The UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights affirms that "the ideal of free human beings enjoying freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created whereby everyone may enjoy his economic, social and cultural rights, as well as his civil and political rights".

It is impossible to talk about those rights without some basic understanding of the socio-economic reality of the world in which we live.

We are aware of a) the magnitude and complexity of the dangerous and explosive situation created by the widening gap between the wealth of the rich nations and the poverty of the poor; b) the increasing scarcity of the basic necessities of life for the poor and sometimes even conscious waste of the same necessities by the rich; c) the exhaustion and insufficiency of many natural resources with the wastage of the same resources on the production of deadly weapons of war; and d) the real existence of food shortages and possibilities of wide-spread famine.

These are not the root causes but the symptoms of domestic and international political and social systems and relationships, which make impossible in many countries the exercise and enjoyment of social, economic and cultural rights. These rights can only become reality if a new international economic order is created based on equity, sovereignty, interdependence, common interest and cooperation among the nations - to correct inequalities and redress existing injustices; to eliminate the widening gap between the rich and the poor; and to make possible economic and social development in peace and justice.

All human rights, be they social, economic, religious or political, are interrelated. They must be taken as a whole. The churches should give them equal importance and seek the application of all of them.

The exercise of some peoples' social and economic rights should not lead to hinder others or deprive them of the enjoyment of the same rights in another part of the world. Human rights are interrelated both substantially and geographically.

The right to life and the right to work

The right to life involves the right to meaningful employment with adequate pay, healthy working conditions, and adequate leisure time with opportunities to use it creatively, meaningfully.

## THE RIGHT TO EQUALITY

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Christian concern for the right to equality finds its motivation especially in three basic statements of the Christian faith:

- human beings are created in the image of God
- in the Creation and in the revelation of Jesus Christ incarnate human beings are bound together as brothers and sisters
- the life and work of Jesus Christ give human beings direction and ultimate meaning in their relations to each other.

Christians must stand for human dignity and solidarity, and struggle against all that which tends to separate human beings such as discrimination based on race, class, creed or sex, and all forms of exploitation, oppression or repression.

This concern for humanity, deeply rooted in the Christian faith, is reflected in the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the two Covenants arising from that Declaration, and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

### Racial inequality

Classical racial discrimination is official and incorporated in the legal system. But racial discrimination and inequality also exists in countries where the law officially seeks to promote equality. Elsewhere subtle cultural and social pressures applied to minority ethnic and racial groups amount to de facto discrimination.

### Sexual inequality

Even where equality between men and women is legally assured - and such cases are rare - social discrimination between the sexes is frequently practiced. Comparatively few women, for example, occupy key positions in either church or state. Even in socialist countries which are known for their progressive legislation in this matter, women are not always able to make their full contribution to society due to the inherited concepts of the role of women in family and society. Historically, men have dominated women and this tradition remains and is perpetuated in the church today. One result is the reluctance of some women to exercise their rights and to assume new roles in society,

The movement towards sex equality has recently been intensified in some developed countries. But its relationship to other struggles

for justice and equality is not always clear. Certain minority groups fear it diverts attention from their common plight as men and women, and to a certain extent hampers their struggle against discrimination. In some developing countries the struggle to liberate the whole community is often given priority over the liberation of a sector of society.

### Migrant workers

Further, immigrants are often deprived of their right to participate in decisions directly affecting them. They should speedily be granted full rights in the countries where they have established their residence and to whose economic well-being they contribute.

### Equality and civil and political rights

Related to the right to equality are the basic civil and political rights, especially

- the right to participate in decision-making in society
- the right of the people to determine how they shall be governed and who shall exercise authority
- the right of the people to determine their own legal systems.

In some countries these rights are totally ignored in practice, and often in law as well. Where these rights are included in legal codes their implementation is often radically limited by relationships of dependence on other nations and multinational firms, or through internal economic exploitation. Through manipulation and distortion legally recognized rights are deprived of all meaning, for example:

- the propagation of a distorted view of reality through monopoly control over the mass media
- the economic plight of the dispossessed which makes their participation in any social decision-making virtually impossible
- brutal repression which annuls the implementation of these rights.

A general pattern emerges in many countries which can be characterized as follows:

- flagrant exploitation which accentuates the inequality between "haves" and "have-nots"
- political structures which serve chiefly to protect the economic interests of the "haves"
- a repressive apparatus created to protect these political structures and economic interests from any challenge

- misuse of the churches to provide ideological support, moral respectability and justification for such a system.

### The role of the Church

Abuses often come through the exercise of economic, political, ecclesiastical power. Church institutions must rid themselves of ties to colonizers and oppressive powers. It is the Church's duty and vocation to opt clearly in favour of the oppressed.

In order to advance the cause of human rights the church must avoid:

- complacency, which comes from a preoccupation with generalities which satisfy the intellect, but which carry no obligation to commitment and action; and
- simple charity, which may ease the conscience of the giver, yet brings no solution to the vast problem of inequality and often diverts attention from the real issues to symptoms.

Christians should:

- organize and develop better means to communicate and share information among groups and communities
- help to conscientize the masses of dispossessed within the churches
- continually exchange opinions in search of a common analysis of problems
- elaborate complementary action strategies
- find ways to provide for those whose rights are violated inexpensive and quick access to legal and civil protection (performing the function of ombudsman where this institution does not exist).

### Further study

These are but a few aspects of the right to equality, and do not represent thorough analysis. However, these observations and suggestions could serve as guidelines, and are commended as such to the CCIA for further study and development, especially in view of the WCC Fifth Assembly.



THE RIGHTS TO NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY, SELF-DETERMINATION,  
INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, AND RELATED RIGHTS

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The right to national sovereignty and to self-determination

Every people has the right to determine its own political, economic and social systems, to its own culture and language, to express religious and other convictions, and to be free from undue foreign influence or internal oppression and discrimination.

The focus on peoples. "Peoples" are not necessarily coincident with nations and states. Peoples are continuous while nations and states may change. The state, which is the legal and political expression of a nation may express the interests of peoples, but in some cases does not and is guilty of violations of their human rights. Churches need to give special attention to violations of the rights of peoples. At the same time, they must recognize that there are internal forces within nations and societies which deprive ethnic, religious and other minorities of their rights.

Undue foreign influence. Many violations result from the self-interested exercise of power by foreign governments and bodies like trans-national corporations. The right to control their own natural resources and thus the sovereignty of developing nations is often menaced by powerful nations. Here the churches have a special responsibility. More study is needed in defining what is meant by "undue" and by "foreign" influence. But it is already clear that former "sending churches" must cease further attempts to determine either the theology or the leadership of other churches.

The role of the churches. The Church has a God-given mission to serve within the economic, political and social context in which it finds itself. Violations of human rights are not due simply to external forces motivated by international economic and political considerations, but also to internal forces. Even when they feel powerlessness in the face of massive violations, the churches must seek to respond to the call of God for justice by analyzing situations and identifying the power structures involved; carrying on a process of conscientization of their members; witnessing for justice; supporting changes in structures, policies and practices which have been impediments to human rights.

The right to international community

In the present state of the international community, there is an urgent need for a larger agreement on the content of the law of human rights and for more effective international implemen-

tation. The work of the UN and regional inter-governmental bodies in this field must be encouraged especially with regard to the creation of more effective implementation machinery. One way the churches can help is to investigate and document violations of human rights in cooperation with secular organizations, and to aid in the formation of public opinion relating to violations of human rights.

Each nation has the right to participate with others on equal basis in solving global problems such as food, population and environment. The Declaration and the Programme of Action of the Sixth Special Session of the UN General Assembly give valuable guidelines for such international collaboration. Consideration must be given to ways to redistribute resources in such a way that at least minimal conditions for human rights can be established for all peoples of the world.

Tensions between national interests and those of the world community underline these concerns and create ambiguities. The right to national sovereignty and self-determination has to be promoted in proper balance with the rights of peoples to international community through participation in both inter-governmental and international non-governmental organizations. This has a special bearing on the life of the church which is by its very nature trans-national. Thus the right of communication and association across national boundaries is of great importance for the full exercise of religious liberty within each national territory and in the international community.

THE PROLIFERATION OF POLITICAL PRISONERS  
AND OF POLITICAL REFUGEES

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It is not easy to define who is the political prisoner today because in most situations, governments refuse to recognize that they hold political prisoners, and classify them as common-law criminals. But definitions given by the oppressive government should not be accepted. It is part of our common international responsibility as churches to determine in concrete situations whether a prisoner is being held for political reasons or for breaches of the law of a non-political nature. This responsibility consists as well of challenging governments whose very definitions clearly violate human rights.

There are today many situations where christians and adherents of other faiths, acting in society out of their religious, cultural or social convictions, are regarded by the authorities to be political offenders and therefore suffer persecution, imprisonment and even death.

The nature of repression. We witness today a proliferation of political repression, increasingly massive and sophisticated in nature and operative in a wide spectrum of countries. Strong substantiation of these points was contained in reports made to the Consultation from many historically distinct, specific situations. They arose, for instance, out of colonial situations, military take-overs, the repression of minorities, internal civil and social conflicts, and the maintenance of personal power. These reports provided clear evidence of institutionally-oppressive, technologically-refined and politically-motivated violations of human rights on a proportion hitherto unknown, involving entire groups, sectors of societies or individuals.

Repression is practised by governments throughout the world, by governments of a wide variety of political complexions. Thousands of persons are imprisoned without trial or as a consequence of unjust sentences, sometimes for many years, because of their suspected political attitudes. Torture is widely and increasingly practised as an instrument of government. Police, army, other branches of the armed forces and other para-military official and unofficial services are used to maintain governments in power. A blatant deterioration of human rights has taken place over the last year in several parts of the world.

Among the violations reported from the various regions were:

- a) disappearances
- b) torture in various forms

- c) assassinations
- d) bombings
- e) threats to the lives of persons and their families
- f) uncertainty created by the existence of parallel police groups
- g) detention without trial
- h) trials conducted in accordance with correct legal procedures, but applying laws which are in contradiction with the national constitution or with internationally-accepted humanitarian law
- i) forceful hospitalization in mental institutions
- j) deportations
- k) death sentences
- l) genocide.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The above-mentioned reports were considered in the context of the standards contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially those pertaining to the situations of political prisoners and political refugees. The imperative need was seen for the churches to insure the vigorous implementation of certain rights which today gain special importance:

- a) The right to fair trial and legal defense. The accused should benefit from legal assistance of his choice, from the time of his arrest and throughout the period of trial and appeal.
- b) The right to fair and public hearing of charges within independent and impartial courts of law. Trials must be open to relatives, the press, and observers, including those of the international community. The presence of international observers in court is clearly effective in influencing the conduct of many trials.
- c) The prohibition of torture and the right to respect for international norms of treatment of prisoners. Efforts to revise the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners should be given close attention. This existing international instrument should constitute effective pressure in situations where the rights of prisoners are violated. Attention was drawn to the frequent collaboration of medical doctors in the practice of torture and the growing use of pharmaceutical products in the process of interrogation and during internment in mental institutions.

- d) The right to leave one's country and return to it. This is the right to live in, leave and return to one's own country. Many de facto (non-mandate) refugees wish to return, sooner or later, to their countries.

The root causes of human rights violations. New patterns are emerging, especially in the relationships between the rich countries and poor countries, which contain the root causes of many of the human rights violations enumerated above. The rising level of consciousness among the oppressed is accompanied, in the last few years, by a realization that systemic and structural change from an oppressive to a more just society is indeed within reach; that a real change of the conditions creating most human rights violations is possible.

This awareness directly threatens the privileges enjoyed by the national and international ruling few. Visible support has long been given by the rich countries to certain sectors of the developing societies, to maintain power and monopoly of economic, social, political and cultural resources. Now internationally coordinated political, military and police instruments are being developed and refined to repress the voices of change.

Among the causes of the proliferation of political prisoners and refugees is the fact that in some countries political power is in the hands of a single person or of a small group who wants to retain power and allow neither free discussion on political questions nor free activity to change the political situation.

There is a need for structures which allow for the full involvement of the people in the exercise of political and economic power, within the democratic functions of the state.